

THE FREEDMEN'S BUREAU OUTLINES THE DUTIES OF FREEDPEOPLE

Rufus Saxton, the assistant commissioner of the Freedmen's Bureau, wrote the following letter to the freedpeople of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

TEXT OF SAXTON'S LETTER

HEADQUARTERS ASS'T COMMISSIONER BUREAU REFUGEES, FREEDMEN
AND ABANDONED LANDS, SOUTH CAROLINA, GEORGIA, AND FLORIDA,
Beaufort, S.C., August 16, 1865

To the Freedmen of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida:

...By the emancipation proclamation of President Lincoln, the laws of Congress, and the will of God, you have been declared "forever free." At the outset of your new career it is important that you should understand some of the duties and responsibilities of freedmen. Your first duty is to go to work at whatever honest labor your hands can find to do, and provide food, clothing, and shelter for your families. Bear in mind that a man who will not work should not be allowed to eat. Labor is ennobling to the character, and, if rightly directed, brings to the laborer all the comforts and luxuries of life. The only argument left to those who would keep you in slavery is, that in freedom you will not work; that the lash is necessary to drive you to the cotton and rice fields; that these fair lands which you have cultivated so many years in slavery will now be left desolate. On the sea-islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, where your brethren have been free for three years, they have nobly shown how much better they can work in freedom. Over forty thousand are happy, and free. Some are working for wages, others are cultivating the land on shares, giving one half to the owner.

GUIDED CLOSE READING QUESTIONS

1. After reading the heading of his letter, who is the intended audience for Saxton's letter?
2. Based on the first sentence of his letter, what document made the freedpeople no longer enslaved?
3. What evidence does Saxton give to convince the freedmen that their "first duty is to go to work" and what work does he expect them to do?

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The agents of the Freedman's Bureau will aid you in making contracts to work for fair wages for your former masters or others who may desire to hire you, or will locate you on small farms of forty acres, which you can hire at an easy rent, with an opportunity to purchase at low rates any time within three years. These are splendid opportunities. Freedmen, let not a day pass ere you find some work for your hands to do, and do it with all your might. Plough and plant, dig and hoe, cut and gather in the harvest. Let it be seen that where in slavery there was raised a blade of corn or a pound of cotton, in freedom there will be *two*. Be peaceful and honest. Falsehood and theft should not be found in freedom; they are the vices of slavery. Keep in good faith your contracts and agreements, remembering always that you are a slave no longer. While guarding carefully your own rights, be as careful not to violate your neighbor's. "Do unto others as you would they should do unto you."

In cases where you feel that you have been wronged, it is neither wise nor expedient to take redress into your own hands, but leave the matter to be settled by three impartial friends of both parties. In cases of difficulty between white men and yourselves, you should appeal to one of the agents in this bureau in your vicinity, who may appoint one referee, the other party one, and you should appoint a third, and the decision of the majority should be considered final. By this easy mode of settling difficulties much trouble may be avoided.

In slavery you only thought of to-day. Having nothing to hope for beyond the present, you did not think of the future, but, like an ox and horse, thought only of the food and work for the day. In freedom you must have an eye to the future, and have a plan and object in life. Decide now what you are to do next year – where you are to plant in the spring, and how much – and in the autumn and winter prepare your land and manure for the early spring planting. After being sure that you have planted sufficient corn and potatoes for food, then put in all the cotton and rice you can, for these are the crops which will pay the best.

GUIDED CLOSE READING QUESTIONS

4. List two things that the Freedman's Bureau was prepared to help freedmen accomplish.
5. Rereading paragraph 2, how would you *summarize* its purpose?
7. What can we infer about the relationship between freedmen and white men in paragraph 3? What evidence supports your position?
8. Based on what Saxton writes in paragraph 4, what concern can be inferred that he has for freedmen?
9. What advice does Saxton provide about farming?

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Bear in mind that cotton is a regal plant, and the more carefully it is cultivated the greater will be the crop. Let the world see ere long the fields of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida white with this important staple cultivated by free labor.

In slavery the domestic relations of man and wife were generally disregarded. Virtue, purity, and honor among men and women were not required or expected. All this must change now that you are free. The domestic altar must be held sacred, and with jealous care you must guard the purity of a wife, a sister, or a daughter; and the betrayer of their honor should be punished and held up to universal condemnation. You are advised to study, in church and out of it, the rules of the marriage relation issued from these headquarters. Colored men and women, prove by your future lives that you can be virtuous and pure.

No people can be truly great or free without education.

Upon the education of your children depends in a great degree the measure of your success as a people. Send your children to school whenever you can. Deny yourselves even the necessities of life to keep your boys and girls at school, and never allow them to be absent a day or an hour while it is in session.

Your liberty is a great blessing which has been vouchsafed to you, and you should be patient and hopeful. The nation, through this bureau, has taken your cause in hand, and will endeavor to do you ample justice. If you do not obtain all your rights this year, be content with part; and if you act rightly, all will come in good time. Try to show by your good conduct that you are worthy of all; and whatever may happen, let no uneasy spirit stir you up to any act of rebellion against the government. Strive to live down by your true and loyal conduct the wicked lie and weak invention of your enemies, that in any event you would rebel against that government and people which have sacrificed so many precious lives and so much treasure in your cause. Could you rise even against those who

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10. In your own words, how can freedpeople prove that they "can be virtuous and pure" based on paragraph 5?

11. What explanation does Saxton give for why children must go to school?

12. How does Saxton's word choice support his claim that freedmen are "worthy of all"?

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oppress you, or against a government which has given you a right to yourselves, your wives and children, and taken from you the overseer, the slave trader, the auction block and broken the driver's whip forever? I have no fears on this point, and trust you to show those who have how groundless they are, and that you are willing to leave your cause in the hands of the government. Ever cherish in your hearts the prayerful spirit, the trusting, childlike faith in God's good providence, which has sustained so many of you in your darkest hour.

The assistant commissioners and agents of this bureau will publish this circular to the freedmen throughout these States, and ministers of the Gospel are requested to have it read in all the churches where the freedmen are assembled.

R. SAXTON,

Brevet Major General, Assistant Commissioner

GUIDED CLOSE READING QUESTIONS

14. Based on paragraph 7, what is Saxton afraid will happen? What strategies does he use to convince freedpeople not to do this?
15. How does Saxton ensure that freedmen will get access to the information in his letter?